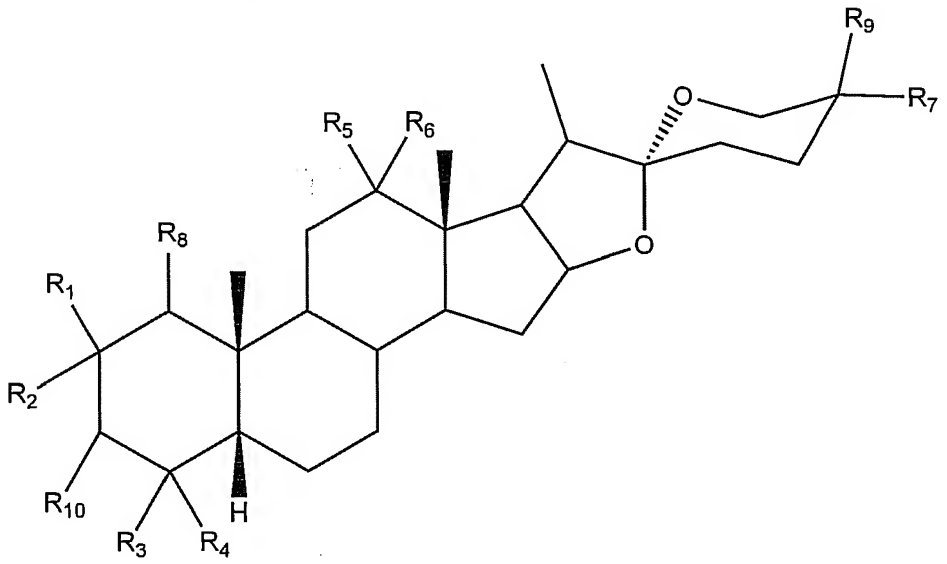
Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (currently amended) A method of stereospecifically preparing a 3ß-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin of the formula



wherein R_1, R_2, R_3, R_4, R_5, R_6, R_7, R_8 and R_9 are, independently of each other, H, C_{1-4} alkyl, OH, or OR (where R = C_{6-12} aryl or C_{1-4} alkyl), or R_5 and R_6 together may represent a =O (carbonyl) or protected carbonyl group, the stereochemistry at carbon centre 3 can be either R or S, and R_{10} represents β-OH, ~~an β-O-linked sugar group or any β-organic ester group,~~ which comprises reducing a 3-keto-5β-H steroidal sapogenin using a reducing agent comprising a hindered organoborane.

2. (original) A method according to claim 1, wherein the reducing agent is a hindered organoborane reagent in which organic groups contain more than two carbon atoms and the sapogenin obtained is predominantly a 3β-hydroxy, 5β-H-sapogenin.

3. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein hindered organoborane is selected from lithium tri-*sec*-butylborohydride, potassium tri-*sec*- butylborohydride, sodium tri-*sec*-butylborohydride, lithium trisiamylborohydride, potassium trisiamylborohydride, potassium triphenylborohydride and lithium triphenylborohydride.

4. (previously presented) A method according to claim 3, wherein the hindered organoborane is lithium tri-sec-butylborohydride.

5. (cancelled)

6. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the molar ratio of the predominant sapogenin obtained to the alternative 3-epimer, is at least about 10:1.

7. (original) A method according to claim 6, wherein the ratio is at least about 15:1.

8. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, when performed in an organic solvent selected from tetrahydrofuran, toluene, *tert*-butyl methyl ether, diethoxymethane, 1,4-dioxan, 2-methyltetrahydrofuran and any mixture thereof.

9. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of tetrahydrofuran.

10. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of toluene.

11. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 1,4-dioxan.

12. (previously presented) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 2-methyltetrahydrofuran.

13. (cancelled)

14. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1~~13~~, wherein the sapogenin is selected from sarsasapogenin, smilagenin, and esters thereof.

15. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the 3-keto, 5β-H steroidal sapogenin starting material is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5β-H, 3-ketone.

16. (original) A method according to claim 15, wherein the heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation is performed using hydrogen and a palladium catalyst in an organic solvent.

17. (original). A method according to claim 16, wherein the palladium catalyst is present on a support.

18. (previously presented) A method according to claim 15, wherein the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone.

19. (previously presented) A method according to claim 18, wherein the diosgenone is obtained by oxidation of diosgenin.

20. (cancel)

21. (cancel)

22. (cancel)

23. (original) A method for the synthesis of smilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto, 5β-H steroidal sapogenin using a hindered organoborane.

24. (withdrawn) A method for the synthesis of epismilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto,5β-H steroidal sapogenin using an organo-aluminohydride.

25. (cancel)

26. (previously presented) A method according to claim 2, wherein the hindered organoborane is an alkali metal tri-alkyl or tri-aryl borohydride reducing agent.

27. (cancel)

28. (cancel)

29. (cancel)

30. (cancel)

31. (cancel)

32. (currently amended) A method according ~~to any one of~~ claim~~s 22 to 25~~ 23, wherein the 3-keto-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5ß-H, 3-ketone.

33. (original) A method according to claim 32, wherein the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone, which is obtained by oxidation of diosgenin.

34. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein a sapogenin initially formed is subsequently converted to a pro-drug form thereof or to another physiologically acceptable form thereof.3

35. (new) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the ß-OH of R_{10} in the sapogenin initially formed is converted to a ß-O-linked sugar group.

36. (new) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the ß-OH of R_{10} is the sapogenin initially formed and subsequently converted to an ß-organic ester group.